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A THREAT TO ARMS CONTROL

The Sverdlovsk Incident

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ADMIRAL STANSFIELD TURNER

WASHINGTON

FOR THE FIRST time since World War II, U.S. officials are saying privately that they are virtually certain the Soviet Union has violated the central provision of an international arms control treaty. Publicly, CIA Director Stansfield Turner told a recent conference of newspaper editors here that there is a "reasonable possibility" an epidemic of anthrax a year ago in Sverdlovsk was caused by bacteria intended for military weapons. This would be a breach of a 1975 accord signed by the U.S., the USSR and 85 other nations, outlawing the production or stockpiling of bacteria for such purposes.

It is known that the Kremlin attempted to cover up the outbreak of anthrax that killed hundreds of people last spring in Sverdlovsk, a military-industrial center 875 miles east of Moscow. Now it is maneuvering to prevent a full investigation of the incident out of what appears to be fear that the findings would irrevocably doom SALT II and the Vienna talks for a mutual reduction of forces in central Europe, as well as critically undermine existing agreements like the one banning orbiting nuclear weapons. In an unusual move, for example, the Foreign Ministry telephoned a statement to Western correspondents in Moscow warning that American suggestions of secret Soviet germ warfare facilities could "shatter current international accords and complicate the efforts of states to curb the arms race."

Actually, it was after piecing together bits of information from eyewitnesses and emigrant sources that U.S. intelligence analysts concluded an explosion had occurred the night of April 3-4, 1979, at a military facility on the outskirts of Sverdlovsk. (This is reportedly one of nine in the USSR that intelligence experts have suspected of producing or storing biological weapons.) Whatever the cause of the eruption, it

is thought to have released hundreds of thousands of anthrax spores.

Among the ancient plagues of animals and man, anthrax attacks humans in two ways. If contracted from the meat of infected cattle, it causes severe inflammation of the intestines, vomiting and eventual death; in this form, the disease has long been known in Russia as "Siberian ulcer." If inhaled from the atmosphere, anthrax germs cause paralysis of the bronchial tubes and lungs, choking victims to death within hours.

The information gathered by American analysts, including some accounts of medical personnel on the scene, indicates that the disease took this latter form. Four days after the explosion the first victims—about 40 military personnel—were brought to the Sverdlovsk hospital. They were followed six days later by the first of more than 200 civilians who were moved into the hospital after other patients had been evacuated. The civilians lived and worked in an area downwind from the explosion site, indicating that they, too, had contracted anthrax from the

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